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ABSTRACT

During the 1995-96 academic year, the Hartford (Connecticut) Public School System (Connecticut) published "Academic Area Outcomes, PreKindergarten-Grade 12," a document that initiated a process of improvement of teaching, learning, and curriculum revision based on continuous assessment and accountability. Creation of this document was not a simple matter in light of the educational, social, political, and economic situation in Hartford. The Hartford school district, with an enrollment of 23,500 students in 32 schools, is the largest district in Connecticut and the second largest in New England. Enrollment is 98% minority,.predominantly Hispanic and African American. The district enrolls 4% of the state's students, and 49.6% are bilingual. Hartford is the fourth poorest city in the nation, and approximately 75% of the students are considered at risk of not graduating. The curriculum revision initiated in this context used input from educators and the community, as well as educational research to define what students should be able to do in each of the academic areas. Working groups consulted available national standards to come up with samples of assessments and outcomes to tell what students should learn and how they should demonstrate their learning. Hartford's experience demonstrates how the collaborative outcomes writing process leads to accountability, improvement, and ownership for implementation of reform. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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During the 1995-96 academic year, the Hartford Public School System published and introduced to the community *Academic Area Outcomes, PreKindergarten-Grade 12* which initiates the process of improvement of teaching, learning, and curriculum revision based on continuous assessment and accountability. Hartford, like many districts across the nation, developed its own standards rather than simply adopting the available national standards published by some subject-area organizations (Willis 1997). Hartford educators used the then-available national standards as one of the cornerstones of *Academic Area Outcomes, PreKindergarten-Grade 12*. The multi-year project delineates student outcomes and assessment by grade level in literacy, English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies. the arts, foreign language, health, physical education, TESOL, and career readiness. The creation of this document was no small feat in light of the educational, social, political, and economic situation in Hartford.

Hartford: The Urban Experience

The Hartford Public School District, with an enrollment of 23,500 students in thirty-two schools, is the largest school district in Connecticut and the second largest in New England. Enrollment is 98% minority, predominantly Hispanic and African American. The district

enrolls 4% of Connecticut's public school students, 49.6% of whom are bilingual and 13.07% receive special education services. it is estimated that over 74% of the student population receives subsidized meals and most are from welfare dependent families. Hartford is the fourth poorest city in the nation, with a staggering 28% of resident living below the poverty level. In addition, Hartford ranks second in the nation, relative to percentage of children living in poverty, tying with Flint, Michigan and Gary, Indiana. Although Connecticut's per capita income ranks among the highest in the nation, paradoxically, Hartford's dropout rate, poverty index, adolescent crime, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment also rank among the highest in the nation.

Out of 166 school districts in the state, Hartford students consistently score the lowest on state tests in reading, mathematics, and science. In 1996, the tenth grade State of Connecticut Academic Performance Test results showed 95% of students scoring below the state standard in science and 95% below the state standard in mathematics. More than 90% of Hartford's fourth graders fail to meet the standard on the Connecticut Mastery Test. Sixty-eighth percent of the students entering high school fail to finish within four years. Of the 8,909 students who entered grades 7 through 12 during the 1995-96 school year, 1,346 (15.8%) dropped out. Approximately 75% of Hartford's students are considered "at-risk" of not graduating and of failing to obtain basic skills necessary for gainful employment or post-secondary study.

Since 1994, the Hartford Public School system has been confronted by many monumental challenges. It has experienced educational innovations on many different levels, including changing demographics, personnel changes at the building and central office including three different superintendents and a new Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Staff Development, the turnover of 20 out of 32

principals within two years, restructuring of central office staff, and the arrival and departure of Educational Alternatives, Inc, a private-for-profit educational management company. However short lived the relationship, Hartford is the only school district in the country to have been taken over by a private management firm.

Given the focus on management, the system's neglect of instructional issues, and severe cutbacks in budgets over many years, the state of curriculum in most academic areas was dismal. Mathematics, science, technology, and literacy revisions lay dormant. Other curriculum guides were so dated as to be worthless. It is within this context that curriculum revision was initiated. The curriculum development process received impetus from the district's strategic plan, ***We Believe in Tomorrow: A Framework for the Strategic Direction of the Hartford Public School.*** The plan included 10 strategic goals can be generalized into three broad categories: curriculum and students outcomes, parent and community involvement, and school organization and management.

Introduction To The Process

The development of the academic area outcomes was guided by guidelines developed and shared with the committees by the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Staff Development. First, district teacher and administrator input had to be sought in the writing of the outcomes by the committee. Second, committee composition had to be reflective and representative of Hartford's broad community - school partnership. Third, guides needed to be based in current research and practice in teaching and learning. Fourth, the guides had to reflect a set of unifying definitions for the development and format of the outcomes. Finally, the guides needed to consider and reflect multiculturalism and diversity, incorporate current trends in technology and media, include

special needs children, reflect sensitivity to gender equity issues, provide alternative forms of assessment, and be user friendly (Chatel, 1996).

In order to create a cohesive document, a set of unifying definitions developed by the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Staff Development guided the development and format of the framework:

Curriculum = a bound set of interrelated elements which act as a whole to achieve a common purpose.

Academic Area Outcome = a description of what students should know at the end of each grade level by academic area

Assessment of Outcomes = the answer to the question, "How do we know they know?"

Teams discussed the difference between standards and outcomes, the difference between a framework and a guide, and the definition of assessment. Was the call for assessment to be interpreted as identification of possible assessment tools and measures or a statement of student behavior? While this dialogue was very exciting, it was also very frustrating because as Cohen (1995) has said, "Even the language of standards is still wet behind the ears, barely sketch out, and not well understood outside a small coterie of professional reformers." However, this dialogue resulted in a common understanding of standards and assessment which guided the development of the framework and can be later used to determine how to adjust instruction in response to student achievement.

District Teacher and Administrator Participation

While approximately 1,000 persons were directly involved in working with the academic area committees, the same question, 'What should students be able to do in each of the academic areas?" was

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asked at the school site level. District teacher and administrator input was gathered through a survey instrument. The chairpersons and committee members read, sorted, and gleaned valuable insights from the information generated at the school level. This information was again shared with school site staff for additional comments and suggestions. It is critical to keep the teachers involved in the curriculum development process since the most important factor in implementing any innovation is the teachers because it is they, the innovation users, who will be most affected by the change (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, Hall 1987). When teachers are involved in the formulation and articulation of an innovation, they are more likely to be personally engaged in its implementation.

Who Should Be on the Committees?

Each committee's composition was reflective and representative of Hartford's broad community - school partnership. Although most of the committee members were teachers, each committee also included parents, administrators, university faculty, a Connecticut State Department of Education Consultant, a special education coordinator, an early childhood coordinator, and, in some cases, a state representative and a student. Broad representation on each committee was sought because public education about curriculum and instruction is critical because schools are locally and popularly controlled and thus quite vulnerable to public pressure (Cohen 1995). Thus, community support of reform is critical to its success.

In total, the committee was comprised of twenty individuals. Communication between committees was also maintained. For example, the early childhood chair participated on all academic area committees and all secondary chairpersons were members of the early childhood curriculum committee. However, the actual working group for most

committees fluctuated between seven and nine individuals whose work was reviewed by the entire committee. Committee of twenty individuals are unworkable, therefore, smaller groups of highly interested and knowledgeable individuals evolved and attended the majority of each committee's work meetings.

The working groups, led by a chairperson or content area coordinator, represented teachers from various grade levels, including a diverse racial mix, as well as, regular and special educators. Research supports curriculum writing by teachers because they have the content background knowledge expected at certain grade levels, they are familiar with the topics or skills that standards address, and they understand the need to and how to make the outcomes framework user-friendly (Mitchell 1996). Also, research supports collaborative curriculum development because it gives teachers an opportunity to engage in ongoing and meaningful dialogue about innovations in their fields, about ways to facilitate learning, and about ways to improve instruction. (Cushman 1996).

Information Gathering: Developing a Knowledge Base

The *Academic Area Outcomes, PreKindergarten-Grade 12* document was developed within a complex social, political, and economic context. As each content area committee reviewed current research in content specific areas, Connecticut Common Core of Learning, U.S.Department of Education Goals 2000, mandated state assessment including the Connecticut Mastery Test and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test, data from National Assessment of Educational Progress, multiple intelligence theory, teaching and learning styles research, school district teacher survey responses, and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) in the outcomes and

assessment writing process, it became evident that each committee's first task was to educate themselves about these multiple reforms, innovations, and data bases. For example, Goals 2000 is overwhelming in its scope in that it attempts to provide a guiding framework for public education that focuses on demanding academic standards and assessment and creates congruency between standards, curriculum, assessment, and instruction. And, although Goals 2000 is intended to provide a unifying academic framework for the nation, from the local perspective it seemed "like just another voice in a veritable babel of reform proposals, advice, legislation, and related chatter" (Cohen 1995, pp. 752). Whereas, Goals 2000 is very general, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) document is so overwhelming in its attention to details and skills as to be of little use to the committees because it excludes nothing. An outcomes document which might be based on this information would take forever to write and implement (pg. 755). This diversity of opinion with respect to philosophical perspective and degrees of generality versus specificity made it impossible to simply adopt one document as the definitive driving force in standards development.

For some content areas such as English Language Arts and Literacy, this task was made all the more challenging in that there were no recommended standards from the respective professional organizations. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association had no national standards at this time. This lack of direction from the disciplines reflected the tensions experienced by the committee. The goal was to set standards which were responsive to parental concerns for "basic skills," based on current research supportive of an integrated language arts philosophy, congruent with state mandated assessment, sensitive to the diverse cultural population, and align curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Ultimately, each committee synthesized relevant and manageable data and identified the strands which would shape the development of the outcomes and assessment framework in light of the previously articulated guidelines. These strands include:

* Recommendations of professional organizations.
* Standards of the state assessment and curriculum frameworks.
* Trends in research and effective practice in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
* Content of exemplary local curriculum guides.
* Attention to multiple dimensions of human growth and development.

This synthesis guided the work of the curriculum writing committees (Glatthorn 1995). Faced with a rich state and national menu of what's important in learning, the committee created the guidelines for making the hard local choices regarding what's important in teaching and learning (Willis 1997).

In addition, each committee explored philosophical issues such as teacher and parental expectations for the given population. Some committee members voiced the concern that the outcomes were too high and not achievable by Hartford's students, where as, other committee members felt that there was nothing that Hartford's students could not do if given appropriate instruction and resources and high expectations for achievement. In the end, it was decided that the outcomes had to reflect the highest standards possible and not compromise on achievement. Even though some students would not be able to reach all of the outcomes, the expectation of teachers, students, and parents was that Hartford's goals were high for all children. All children deserve equal access to opportunities and outcomes for learning

The Document

The first collection of information resulted in a four-inch thick volume which was later reduced to a more user-friendly framework of seventy pages that were tabbed by academic area with outcomes from grades pre-kindergarten through grade twelve. When appropriate, an outcome was coded to reflect the Connecticut Mastery Test, the Connecticut Academic Performance Test, as well as, literacy and mathematics. To further increase accessibility to the outcomes, wall charts from Grades Pre-Kindergarten - Grade 3, and from Grades 4 - 6, were developed in English and Spanish.

Focus on Quality of Sample Outcomes

Having put some distance between the creative process and the final product, it is important to ask questions regarding the quality of the outcomes. Below are sample writing outcomes and assessment. Using criteria articulated by Mitchell (1996), we attempt to address the quality of the outcomes and assessment while keeping in mind that standards are not curriculum nor classroom management but a vision of what education should be.

Sample from Academic Area Outcomes, PreKindergarten-Grade 12

Table 1

	Writing Outcomes	*Assessment*
Gr. K	*Expresses ideas in print*	*Engage in writing or writing-like activities using scribble writing, transitional spelling.*
	Displays writing-like behaviors.	*Use drawings, marks, symbols and letters to imitate writing.*
	Print own name.	*Print first name.*
Gr.1	*Write name and all upper and lower case letters.*	*Write first and last name and all letters from memory.*
	Write fictional or non-fictional	*Compose a narrative with a simple*

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	narrative.	*story line and a beginning, middle, and ending.*
	Use prewriting activities.	*Brainstorm and web ideas, and organize ideas sequentially.*
	Apply conventions of print.	*Print left to right, top to bottom, space between words, use proper punctuation and capitalization.*
Gr. 3	*Apply the writing process.*	*Produce a final product independently using computer.*
	Write from different points of view, for different purposes, and in a variety of forms.	*Compare narrative and descriptive forms of writing.*
	Edit work of self and others.	*Correct beginning capitalization, ending punctuation, spelling and usage.*
	Revise work.	*Change content for clarity, elaboration, support, focus.*
Gr. 5	*Use the writing process strategies of brainstorming, planning, composing, conferencing, revising, editing, and creating a final product.*	*Write for different purposes, from different points of view, and in a variety of forms (expository, narrative, descriptive)*
	Apply conventions of standard English in written work.	*Self and peer edit written work; use subject-verb agreement; and spell words correctly.*
Gr. 6	*Use the writing process strategies of brainstorming, planning, composing, conferencing, revising, editing, and creating a final product.*	*Write for different purposes, from different points of view, and in a variety of forms (expository, narrative, descriptive)*
	Write to discover and clarify thoughts.	*Create graphic organizers to summarize information, draft essays to demonstrate metacognition; explain processes used in problem solving; pre-write and peer conference to clarify thinking.*

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Academic Standards Quality Checklist,

(Adapted from Mitchell, 1996)

Table 2

* *Concerned with "big ideas."*
* *Balanced, accurate, and sound.*
* *Clear and useful.*
* *Parsimonious - not too many and not too long.*
* *Built by consensus.*
* *Assessable.*
* *For students, not for adults.*
* *Developmental.*
* *Visionary.*

Using Mitchell's criteria for evaluating the quality of standards, this sample of outcomes and assessment reveals several strengths. First, the sample can be said to be accurate, clear parsimonious, assessable, to a limited extent, developmental, and visionary. In examining the outcomes with respect to writing process, it is clear that they are accurate in terms of the contents and the intent in that writing is treated as a process. The assessment treats the products of writing in terms of genres of writing, application of editing and revising skills, and at the early grades as acquiring a sense of using writing to convey meaning. Overall, writing is presented as both a process and a product. The outcomes are written using clear language understandable to teachers, parents, and students. This clarity ensures assessability. When viewed through the developmental lens, it is necessary to examine the assessment in order to judge the developmental quality of the outcomes because they are repetitive in language but are based on differing levels of achievement. According to Mitchell (1996) these outcomes would be stronger if they evidenced an increases in knowledge and sophistication of skills which would make them useful as guides for curriculum and instruction. The outcomes are visionary in that they tackle head-on the issue of standard English. The literacy committee made it clear that all children must be able to code switch, and recognize the need for and value of this skill in today's society. Finally, these outcomes are visionary in the high standards they set for all children.

Although the outcomes have many strengths, when Mitchell's criteria is further applied, some concerns do surface. First is the issue of ***"big ideas."*** Can one really say that printing one's name and the upper and lower case letters is a ***big idea*** in the development of writing in kindergarten and first grade? Mitchell defines a ***big idea*** as something to shoot for for all students. Might there be loftier and more global outcomes, such as the application of concepts about print, which can be included here in response to this issue? Also, the inclusion of printing the upper and lower case letters is not responsive to accepted scholarship in writing development which views this as a discreet skills not necessarily a ***"big idea."***

Summary

Academic Area Outcomes, PreKindergarten-Grade 12 is the result of a collaborative effort between the educational community and the broader community within which it exists. The document focuses on content standards that tell what knowledge and skills students should learn, and how they will be able to demonstrate this. The next steps must address performance standards and the consequences for failing to reach them (Willis 1997). Although parents, legislators, administrators, and teachers want to know about existing school programs and the future directions their schools are going to take, students need to know the consequences for failing to meet the standards. The collaborative outcomes writing process attempts to "satisfy a community's reasonable expectation that *(schools)* provide meaningful information on how they are performing " (Schmoker 1996, p.47). Hartford must face the very though task enforcing standards that it has articulated.

The collaborative outcomes writing process has the additional benefit of building in accountability, improvement and ownership for

implementation of the innovation, the new outcomes document on the part of the community. The accountability and ownership place a responsibility on the schools to actually implement the outcomes and on the community to support them (p.48). The ground work for implementation of the outcomes has been prepared by the collaborative nature of its creation.

Academic Area Outcomes, PreKindergarten-Grade 12 is intended to facilitate change in the teaching, learning, and assessing of learning in Hartford. It's a unifying framework for the development of curriculum guides in that it provides a vision of the high educational goals to which Hartford aspires for all of its children. Given the volatile political situation, the poverty of its children, and the inconsistency in its educational leadership, it is critical that Hartford's educational community remember that the call for standards is not going away since it is a world demand rather than a local issue. And, Hartford's children deserve more than they are now getting.

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